SIXTEENTH STREET
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS NO. DC-717

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HABS
DC
WASH
635-

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

SIXTEENTH STREET

HABS No. DC-717

Location: This avenue originates on the north side of Lafayette Park and continues due north uninterrupted to the original city boundary at Florida Avenue. From there it extends north on the same axis to the Maryland border.

Owner/Manager: The right-of-way spanning from building line to building line is the property of the U. S. government; the paved roadways, sidewalks, and the planted areas between are under the jurisdiction of the District of Columbia Department of Public Works.

Present Use: Major thoroughfare that extends due north from the White House.

Significance: Intended at one time to mark a new world meridian, the axis of Sixteenth Street runs through the front and back doors of the White House. Wider than most of the orthogonal streets, in breadth and ceremony it is akin to the city's grand avenues. Around the turn of the century, wealthy Washington widow Mary Henderson attempted to develop the street as the "Avenue of the President's" through congressional pressure and speculative building. Although dozens of historic structures along the street were razed during the 1920-70s, those that remain have earned the segment between N Street and Florida Avenue distinction as the National Register's Sixteenth Street Historic District.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of plan: 1791, L'Enfant Plan; 1792 Ellicott Plan.

2. Alterations and additions:

1872-73:	Street paved with wood block from Lafayette Square to the boundary. Park formed at Scott Circle.
ca. 1940:	Underpass constructed to carry 16th Street traffic under Scott Circle.

B. Historical Context:

On his plan for the city, Pierre L'Enfant made Sixteenth Street a major north/south axis emanating due north from the reservation set aside for the President's House. Due south of the White House, L'Enfant envisioned a wide expanse of parkland on axis with the street and terminating at an equestrian statue of George Washington. This statue was to mark the apex of a right angle formed by the broad north/south running President's Park and the east/west running Mall. On the original plan, the street runs through three large open rectangles as it continues from the President's House north to the boundary. The southernmost of these rectangles is at its intersection with Massachusetts and Rhode Island avenues (See Scott Circle, HABS No. DC-684). Several blocks north of this is a smaller open square, although not at an avenue intersection. About a block north of this square is a large rectangle marking the intersection of three avenues.

In 1792, after L'Enfant was dismissed from his position, Andrew Ellicott compiled a plan for the city largely from L'Enfant's notes, but with minor changes.

Ellicott departed from L'Enfant's plan in the design of Sixteenth Street by creating an open space at the intersection of K Street, the widest street in the plan. He also enlarged the square at the intersection of Rhode Island and Massachusetts avenues, but eliminated the three avenues intersecting Sixteenth Street several blocks to the north, as well as the large open space where they converged. He maintained New Hampshire Avenue, however, and created two triangular open spaces that are now Reservation Nos. 146 and 147.

After the plan for the city was set out on paper in 1791-92, the land itself, occupied by numerous farms, developed slowly according to the new design. Prior to the transfer of land for the right-of-way from the original proprietors to the federal government, Sixteenth Street ran over three tracts of land. Port Royal extended from the White House to about L Street, and Jamaica spanned from L Street north to about S Street. Both tracts were originally patented to John Peerce in 1687, but by the time the city was founded, the former belonged to Samuel Davidson and the latter to John Waring. From about S Street to beyond the boundary, the avenue covered land within a tract known as Flint's Discovery, patented in 1725 by John Flint but owned in 1791 by Robert Peter.[1]

St. John's Church, built in 1816 on the northeast corner of Sixteenth and H streets, was one of the first structures on the new street. The growing population of Episcopalians in the neighborhood commissioned the design from architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe, who also served as city surveyor and was assisting with the reconstruction of the White House and Capitol, recently burned by the British in 1814. The church was built on the north side of a large open square, later to become Lafayette Park (See Lafayette Park, HABS No. DC-676). Several substantial homes, such as the Decatur House and the Cutts House (now widely known as the Dolley Madison House), were soon built facing the square, but to the north the street remained largely unbuilt.

City development during Washington's first five decades was limited mostly to the region of the city southwest of the President's House and on Capitol Hill. A map compiled in 1857-61 shows that gas streetlamps had been installed on the east side of the street, but fewer than half the lots facing the street appear to have been developed. Among the houses on Sixteenth Street at this time was 1601 I Street, built for John Adams, son of John Quincy Adams. He and his wife Mary Hellen Adams occupied the residence from the 1820s until 1869.[2] South of the President's House, the axis of Sixteenth Street was slightly misinterpreted when the Washington Monument, begun in 1848, was located east of its intended location so that it is now actually closer to the axis of 15th Street.

In light of the slow development of what had been planned as an important thoroughfare, Benjamin B. French, commissioner of Public Buildings, described the avenue in 1856:

> Sixteenth Street west is immediately in front, and in full view of the President's House. It is 160' wide, as laid down in the map of the city; but beyond K Street, to which point it has been graded and graveled, the only indication of its being a street is a zig-zag cart track. If it was opened and graded to Boundary Street, besides being one of the largest and finest

---

[1] McNeil, passim.

[2] Commission of Fine Arts, II, 93.

> streets in the metropolis, it would greatly tend to relieve the barren prospect which meets the eye from the north front of the President's House between K and Boundary streets.[3]

French's suggestions were laid aside for almost two more decades, partially due to the impending national crisis of the Civil War, which brought change to both ends of the street. As tensions mounted, many southern sympathizers residing in the homes around Lafayette Square--at the south end--fled to the Confederate States, and the square itself was used as a temporary encampment for troops assigned to protect the city. On axis with Sixteenth Street due south of the White House, the grounds of the partially built Washington Monument were used as a cattle corral. At the northern reaches of the planned roadway, the Massachusetts Brigade set up camp on the vast farm at Florida Avenue called Meridian Hill. The elegant farmhouse straddling the axis of the street was used as a war headquarters and hospital.[4]

The aftermath of the war brought rapid development to the city during a whirlwind of public works under a territorial government that lasted from 1871-74. During its first year, the Board of Public Works, under the leadership of Alexander "Boss" Shepherd, indicated that it had overseen the paving of Sixteenth Street from Lafayette Square to Boundary Street. This widespread grading and paving program followed the terms established by the Parking Act of 1870. According to the legislation, the unusually wide rights-of-way throughout the city were to be narrowed to approximately 35' roadways flanked by sidewalks with a strip of "parked" area between that could be sodded and planted with trees. The remaining land between the sidewalks and building lines could be enclosed by city residents and used as front yards.

The territorial government reputedly planted thousands of street trees throughout the city, and may have planted a scheme of Tulip Poplars the entire length of Sixteenth Street. After the territorial government fell in 1874, its responsibilities were turned over to a board of commissioners, which published a map in 1880 showing street-tree species throughout the city. The map indicates that Sixteenth Street was lined with poplars; today's Sixteenth Street still has evidence of these poplars, but instead of being planted in the strips between the sidewalk and roadway, the several old specimens that remain are planted between the sidewalk and the building lines within the front yards of the facing residences. The trees appear to predate many of the homes built along the road, which feature fences and front walks consciously diverted around their trunks.

In the three decades following the territorial government's reign, Sixteenth Street was transformed from an undeveloped track to a fashionable thoroughfare. In 1872-73, the rectangular open space at the intersection of Sixteenth Street with N Street and Massachusetts and Rhode Island avenues was landscaped as a circle flanked by two triangular parks, and an equestrian statue of Civil War hero Winfield Scott was erected in the center (See Scott Circle, HABS No. DC-684). By the 1880s, elegant homes began replacing the shanties, brick kilns, and storage facilities that had occupied the area between K Street and Scott Circle. In 1881, for instance, wealthy Ohioan Nicholas Anderson purchased a lot at the southeast

---

[3] Annual Report . . ., 1856.

[4] Commission of Fine Arts, I, 323.

corner of Sixteenth and K streets that had been used for storage by a merchant of wood and coal. Anderson then commissioned renowned architect H. H. Richardson to design his $100,000 mansion, perhaps the most expensive home in Washington to date.[5]

Two years later, in 1884, Richardson received another commission on Sixteenth Street on the north side of Lafayette Square across from St. John's Church. There he built attached homes for two close friends--statesman John Hay and historian Henry Adams--that would become a center of Washington social and intellectual life. Millionaire industrialist Lucius Tuckerman tried to secure Richardson to design his house at the southwest corner of Sixteenth and I streets in 1886, but the architect was in poor health, so Tuckerman hired the local firm of Hornblower and Marshall to design his elegant mansion.[6]

Up to the 1890s, the avenue featured a mix of ostentatious new homes as well as older humble frame dwellings, and it was fairly racially integrated. The three lots purchased in 1889 by Letitia Chandler at the northeast corner of Sixteenth and K Streets, for instance, had formerly been the site of several houses occupied by a prominent black family that included Samuel L. Cook, a physician who practiced at this address, and Mary V. Cook, a Washington school teacher.[7] It is possible that the Cook family was among many free blacks who moved to the Sixteenth Street corridor when it was less populated because they were excluded from the populated white areas.

As new mansions lined the street and encircled the elegant park at Scott Circle, Sixteenth Street became the domain of the rich and influential, and as the turn-of-the-century neared, this affluent development spread north toward the city boundary. North of Scott Circle, former mayor of Leavenworth, Kansas, Hampton B. Denman built his Romanesque house on the east side of the street between Corcoran and R streets in 1886, and in 1891, Supreme Court Justice Henry B. Brown built an eclectic neo-Belgium home on the west side between Riggs Place and S Street.[8] In addition to the freestanding mansions, more modest, rowhouses were built as speculative ventures along the prominent roadway. In keeping with residential development, several churches were constructed to serve Washingtonians' wide variety faiths. Baptists built the First Baptist Church on Sixteenth Street at O Street in 1889.[9] A year later, the National Committee of the Swedenborgian Church purchased lots at 1611 Sixteenth Street to construct the Church of the Holy City.[10]

Despite this surge of construction, farther north, Sixteenth Street was still flanked by small farms and wood shacks in the late 1880s. The area at the intersection with U Street was so low and swampy that it was used for ice skating in winter. In light of suburban development enabled by streetcar lines, the

---

[5] Commission of Fine Arts, I, 144-57.

[6] Commission of Fine Arts, II, 73.

[7] Commission of Fine Arts, II, 144-48.

[8] Commission of Fine Arts, I, 257-77.

[9] The church was razed and rebuilt on the same site in 1953. Goode, 213-14.

[10] Commission of Fine Arts, I, 198-231.

Commissioners of the District of Columbia recommended in 1889 that Sixteenth Street be extended beyond the boundary to meet the Piney Branch Creek. North of Florida Avenue, a dirt track, known informally as Meridian Avenue, continued the axis of Sixteenth Street north for several blocks. Probably in anticipation of this extension, John B. Henderson purchased a huge tract of land just north of the city boundary on the west side of the unpaved Meridian Avenue where he built "Henderson's Castle," in 1888. He and his wife, Mary Foote Henderson, entertained lavishly and expanded their fortress on the promontory several times.

With Sixteenth Street anchored with mansions at both its north and south ends, construction continued to fill the blocks between. In 1903, the roadway was flanked by almost as many vacant lots as buildings, but by the 1930s, an almost continuous line of structures defined the boundaries of the wide corridor. After the turn of the century, the new structures began to exhibit the national shift in taste away from the Victorian styles--Italianate, Second Empire and Romanesque. Ohio Senator Joseph Foraker's house, built at Sixteenth and P streets by Library of Congress architect Paul Pelz in 1897, combined the academic styles of the Beaux Arts, as did Nathan C. Wyeth's design for 1125 Sixteenth Street, built for Mrs. George Pullman in 1908. Two other houses built in 1908, one for entomologist Charles Marlatt at 1521 Sixteenth Street, and one at 1609 Sixteenth Street designed by Appleton Clark, exhibit the influence of the Arts and Crafts movement.[11]

As architectural tastes shifted around the turn of the century, the increasing importance of the national capital promoted many national organizations to locate their headquarters in Washington. Sixteenth Street offered these organizations both a convenient location and a prestigious address. The National Geographic Society--an outgrowth of the elite Cosmos Club, based near the south end of Sixteenth Street, on Lafayette Square--moved into Hubbard Memorial Hall on the southwest corner of Sixteenth and M streets in 1903. By 1913 the institution had expanded into an adjacent building on Sixteenth Street. Several blocks north, Andrew Carnegie's philanthropic Carnegie Institution made its headquarters at Sixteenth and P streets in 1908. Perhaps the most commanding of these institutional headquarters, however, is the Supreme Council Scottish Rite Temple built by John Russell Pope in 1911 at the southeast corner of Sixteenth and S streets.

While some groups built new structures, others occupied existing mansions that were gradually vacated as residents moved farther north to the expanding suburbs. Alexander Graham Bell's former home on Scott Circle, for example, was occupied in the 1930s by the National Democratic Club, while the National Republican Club occupied another house across the circle. The Georgian-Revival mansion built at Sixteenth and M streets for Colorado miner Simon Guggenhiem in 1906 was converted to the headquarters of the National Education Association soon after World War I.

Changing demographics, rising property taxes, and the introduction of income tax in 1913 halted the construction of large homes on the south end of the street. The new structures erected in the remaining open lots included elegant hotels and apartment buildings, and existing structures were increasingly turned over to organizations and embassies. William Windom's Scott Circle home became the Peruvian Embassy in the 1930-40s, and the Chinese Legation occupied a former dwelling on the northeast side of Scott Circle. The Pullman House at 1125

---

[11] Commission of Fine Arts, II, 337; 389-392.

Sixteenth Street became the Russian Embassy in 1914, and in the 1920s, Henry B. Brown's residence at 1720 Sixteenth Street was occupied by the Persian Legation.

These changes all came under the watchful eye of John and Mary Foote Henderson from their perch on Meridian Hill. After John Henderson's death in 1913, his widow continued to work tirelessly to transform Sixteenth Street into the "Avenue of the President's," a name given to the street at her insistence in 1913 only to be revoked the following year. In an effort to glorify the large tract of land across from their castle, the Henderson's tried to convince Congress to relocate the President's House there. Failing in that effort, they then promoted it as a site for the Lincoln Memorial. Mrs. Henderson also tried to convince the Freemasons to build their Scottish Rite Temple there rather than the site farther south. Although the Hendersons failed to fill the space with an important building, they successfully convinced Congress to purchase the tract for a large public park. Built between 1912-36, Meridian Hill Park is an Italianate masterpiece of cascading fountains, mosaic work, and statuary (See HABS No. DC-532). Although the site was chosen for its magnificent view over the city, the 85'-tall Roosevelt apartment building erected south of the park in 1919 blocked much of that view, to the dismay of park designers and Mrs. Henderson.

Where Mrs. Henderson could not succeed with reason, she used her money. She purchased property along the northern reaches of Sixteenth Street and financed the construction of almost a dozen mansions, which she rented or sold to foreign governments as embassies. Her efforts are well summed up in a presentation she made to Congress in 1927:

> Something like the Champs Elysees, Sixteenth Street is central, straight, broad, and long; . . . its portal at the District line is the opening gateway for motor tourists to enter the Capital. On the way down its seven-mile length to the portals of the White House, each side of the thoroughfare will be a dream of beauty; long, impressive vistas; beautiful villas, artistic homes, not only for American citizens, but diplomats of foreign countries. Whatever there is of civic incongruities will be wiped out. It will be called Presidents Avenue.[12]

While Henderson attempted to line the north end of the street with elegant residences, a gradual metamorphosis was taking place in the blocks nearer the White House. With changing post-World War I demographics, the suburbs were expanding thanks to trolleys cars, and increasingly, the automobile, while the inner city was becoming an office and commercial zone. As some homes were turned over to embassies and organizations, others were demolished and replaced with larger office buildings, hotels, and apartments. In 1925, in the block between I and K streets, the Anderson House and three adjacent Victorian homes were razed to make way for the Carleton Hotel, and in 1927, the Hay and Adams houses were demolished for the Hay-Adams Hotel.

Traffic congestion increased through the 1920s, and by 1937 a guidebook to the city described Scott Circle as follows: "With its inner and outer rings of surging traffic, this is for pedestrians probably the most hazardous ground within the

---

[12] Mary Foote Henderson, as quoted in Commission of Fine Arts, I, xiii.

District."[13] In an effort to ease the bottleneck at this intersection of three major commuter routes, a tunnel was constructed in 1941 to carry Sixteenth Street traffic underneath the circle. What had once been a park for rest and relaxation became little more than a traffic island, completely inaccessible to pedestrians. By the time the underpass was complete, the old homes had been razed, one by one, to be replaced by modern buildings that included the General Scott Apartment House, the Australian Embassy, and the National Education Association (NEA) headquarters.

The destruction of the historic structures continued into the 1960s as the Tuckerman house, used by the Motion Picture Association since 1945, was torn down in 1967 for new building headquarters, and in 1968, expansion of the NEA building necessitated the demolition of the Guggenhiem house at Sixteenth and M streets.[14] After more than forty of these venerable old structures had been razed, Sixteenth Street was designated a National Historic District.[15]

One factor that led to the demolition of so many historic Sixteenth Street buildings was the prosperity of the neighborhood and the escalating value of the land. Today, Sixteenth Street south of Scott Circle features some of the city's most elegant hotels. St. John's Church is the oldest remaining structure, and continues as an active congregation. In contrast to Latrobe's old church, the 1969 Third Church of Christ, Scientist built across the street at Sixteenth and I streets by I. M. Pei adds a note of stark modernity to the streetscape.

While prosperity led to the demolition of many homes at the south end of the street, to the north many of the Sixteenth Street buildings were neglected or converted into boardinghouses and apartments as the neighborhood declined. Although many have now been restored, the neighborhood has changed, a fact aptly illustrated by the fate of Gladys Werlich, who lived in the grand Victorian house built for Leavenworth, Kansas, Mayor Denman. In 1976, the 84-year-old woman died from injuries received from a group of neighborhood youths during a robbery attempt within blocks of her home.[16]

One bright spot in the twentieth century development of the avenue was the erection of the Jefferson Memorial in 1942. Although the memorial is not actually located on Sixteenth Street, it terminates its axis, due south of the White House.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. Overall dimensions:

1. Width: The right-of-way for Sixteenth Street is 160' wide from building line to building line.

2. Length: Within the historic city limits, the street is approximately 1.25

---

[13] Federal Writer's Project, 683.

[14] Goode, 105-6; 127-28.

[15] Goode, 134.

[16] Commission of Fine Arts, I, 252.

miles from Lafayette Square to Florida Avenue.

B. Elements within the right-of-way

1. Roadway: A 50'-wide paved roadbed comprised of four lanes of two-way traffic runs the length of the right-of-way, except at the underpass at Scott Circle between M and O streets where the roadway is widened to allow four lanes to continue under the circle, while one lane each of northbound and southbound traffic remains on grade. A narrow concrete median begins south of O Street to divide northbound and southbound traffic entering the underpass.

2. Sidewalks and street trees: Young columnar English oaks line the roadway, along with a few scattered maples. A consistent system of mature tulip poplars are planted within the fenced-in front yards of many properties facing the street. There are curb cuts throughout for circular drives. South of O Street the roadway and sidewalk are illuminated by Washington Globe lamps. North of O Street, highway lamps extend over the roadway.

3. Reservations:

a. The street begins at H Street on the north side of Lafayette Square (see HABS No. DC-676)

b. Between M and O streets, the street is diverted around Scott Circle (see HABS No. DC-684).

c. Sixteenth Street is flanked by Reservation No. 146 south of U Street and by Reservation No. 147 north of U Street at the intersection of New Hampshire Avenue (see HABS No. DC-704).

C. Framing elements: Once framed by elegant mansions, Sixteenth Street is now flanked by a variety of churches, residences, embassies, hotels and offices, varying in height from three to thirteen stories.

D. Vistas: Because Sixteenth Street rises slightly as it heads north, it offers almost constant views of the White House, interrupted only by the statue and underpass at Scott Circle. From the heights north of Florida Avenue, the Jefferson Memorial is visible behind the White House, creating the optical illusion of a domed White House.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Maps:

Baist, G. W. "Baist's Real Estate Atlas of Surveys of Washington, D. C." Philadelphia, 1887, 1903, 1913, 1919, 1924, 1932, 1939, 1956, and 1968.

Board of Public Works. "Exhibit Chart of Improved Streets and Avenues." 1872.

Boschke, A. "Topographical Map of the District of Columbia surveyed in the years

'57, '58, and '59."

Ellicott, Andrew. "Plan of the City of Washington." 1792.

Hopkins, G. "Map of the District of Columbia from Official Records and Actual Surveys." 1887.

Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. "Plan of the City of Washington, District of Columbia, showing the Public Reservations." Prepared by Orville E. Babcock. 1871.

Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. "Map of the City of Washington showing the Public Reservations Under Control of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds." 1884, 1887, and 1894.

L'Enfant, Pierre Charles. "Plan of the City of Washington." 1791.

B. Early Views:

ca. 1890 View south on Sixteenth Street from Corcoran Street (Commission of Fine Arts, I, 196).

1915: View north up Sixteenth Street from H Street (Commission of Fine Arts, II, xvii).

1923: View south on Sixteenth Street toward the White House from M Street (Commission of Fine Arts, II, 215).

1932: Aerial view, looking south from Columbia Road (Commission of Fine Arts, II, xxii).

1946: View north up Sixteenth street from M Street (Commission of Fine Arts, II, xxix).

1947: Aerial view looking north from L Street (Commission of Fine Arts, II, 216).

C. Bibliography:

Annual Reports of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1867-1933.

Commission of Fine Arts. Sixteenth Street Architecture I. Washington, D.C.: GPO. 1978.

Commission of Fine Arts. Sixteenth Street Architecture II. Washington, D.C.: GPO. 1988.

Federal Writers Project. Washington City and Capital. Works Progress Administration. Washington, D.C.: GPO. 1937.

Goode, James M. Capital Losses: A Cultural History of Washington's Destroyed Buildings. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979.

Hawkins, Don Alexander. "The Landscape of the Federal City: A 1792 Walking Tour." Washington History 3 (Spring/Summer, 1991): 10-33.

McNeil, Priscilla W. "Rock Creek Hundred: Land Conveyed for the Federal City." Washington History 3 (Spring/Summer, 1991): 34-51.

Prepared by: Elizabeth Barthold
Project Historian
National Park Service
1993

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION:

The Plan of Washington, D.C., project was carried out from 1990-93 by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER) Division, Robert J. Kapsch, chief. The project sponsors were the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation Inc. of Washington, D.C.; the Historic Preservation Division, District of Columbia Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, which provided Historic Preservation Fund monies; the National Capital Region and its White House Liaison office, NPS; and the National Park Foundation Inc.

HABS historian Sara Amy Leach was the project leader and Elizabeth J. Barthold was project historian. Architectural delineators were: Robert Arzola, HABS; Julianne Jorgensen, University of Maryland; Robert Juskevich, Catholic University of America; Sandra M. E. Leiva, US/ICOMOS-Argentina; and Tomasz Zweich, US/ICOMOS-Poland, Board of Historical Gardens and Palace Conservation. Katherine Grandine served as a data collector. The photographs are by John McWilliams, Atlanta, except for the aerial views, which are by Jack E. Boucher, HABS, courtesy of the U.S. Park Police - Aviation Division.